

**DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY AND FIRE PROTECTION**  
**OFFICE OF THE STATE FIRE MARSHAL**  
**RUBEN GRIJALVA, STATE FIRE MARSHAL**



P.O. Box 944246  
SACRAMENTO, CA 94244-2460  
Website: [www.fire.ca.gov](http://www.fire.ca.gov)  
(916) 445-8200

September 29, 2005

Re: Fraud Investigation

Last night two fire extinguisher licensees were arrested by Torrance Police Department at a local business in Torrance, CA and charged with Penal Code section 146a (b). This arrest was a result of information that was reported to security personnel in the business complex, who in turn observed the two suspects, detained them and contacted local police. After police talked to the suspects in the field they were arrested, transported to the Torrance Police Department for questioning and later booked into L.A. County Jail. See attached news article.

The company that had employed them posted bail for both of them and they were subsequently released. Deputy State Fire Marshal Al Adams was contacted by Torrance Fire Department to assist in the investigation.

Our office has immediately suspended the licenses and begun our investigation of the licensees. This case may be more widespread throughout the region. Any fire agency, businesses, or individuals with any information that may assist us with identifying additional victims or witnesses are asked to contact the Office of the State Fire Marshal at 916-445-8376

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. Grijalva".

RUBEN GRIJALVA  
State Fire Marshal

## **Businesses may have been tricked by bogus inspectors**

**Torrance police believe two men posed as firefighters and charged companies for phony services.**

*By Larry Altman Daily Breeze*

Fire officials said Wednesday they are investigating whether two men posing as firefighters in Torrance tricked small business owners across Southern California into paying them hundreds of dollars for bogus inspections.

Torrance police arrested the men Tuesday when a suspicious manager at a Pacific Coast Highway business notified shopping center security officers that they were in the parking lot, Torrance fire Capt. Steve Deuel said.

"They appeared as firefighters saying they were there to do the quarterly fire inspection," Deuel said.

The Torrance businessman who spotted them said Wednesday he had seen the men two weeks earlier when one walked into his store and said he had an order to conduct an inspection. The inspector wore a dark blue T-shirt that said "Fire," dark blue pants and shiny black boots, just like a firefighter.

"I said, 'Why don't you show me your credentials and your license,' " said the businessman, who asked not to be identified. "He said, 'OK, well, it's out in my truck.' He turned and walked out the door. Next thing I know ...he's jumping in the car and they are pulling out."

The arrests of Noel Andres Evangelista, 20, of Harbor City and Jose Manuel Bernal, 22, of Jalisco, Mexico - following an inspection at a Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf cafe at Pacific Coast Highway and Crenshaw Boulevard --triggered an immediate response by the state Fire Marshal's Office. A state investigator questioned the businessman Tuesday, and state authorities met with Torrance Fire Department officials Wednesday.

"It looks like there may be potentially a large number who would have been (victims), but we don't know how many they've actually hit," Deuel said.

Investigators believe the con could have been committed throughout Southern California, and they are looking for victims who may not realize they were taken.

Unwitting business operators allowed them to check their lighting, electrical systems and kitchens. Later, they received bills for as much as \$400 to \$500, firefighters said.

On Tuesday, after their arrests, the men avoided the question and changed the subject when officers asked them if they were firefighters, Deuel said. Later, they said they worked for a private company called Orco Fire Protection. No such company could be located.

The businessman who earlier had contact with the men said he was presented with paperwork that included a checklist of items to inspect. But the paperwork had no company logo, and did not look credible, he said.

"Essentially a guy came in and said, 'Hi, I'm here to do a fire inspection on your facility,' " the businessman said. "I said, 'OK, who sent you? Do you have a (purchase order) or a work order?' I said, 'Do you have any ID?'"

"When the men drove away, the businessman told security officials at the complex to alert his fellow store owners. Security officials stepped in Tuesday afternoon when the men returned.

Evangelista and Bernal were arrested on suspicion of posing as firefighters. Jail records show each man was released Wednesday morning after posting \$20,000 bail.

They could not be located for comment.

Bernal and Evangelista did hold state licenses issued by the Fire Marshal's Office, but Deuel said "all that means is they have licenses." The Torrance Fire Department did not authorize them to conduct inspections in the city and send bills through the mail.

Torrance firefighters occasionally conduct code inspections at businesses. Private companies also conduct inspections at the request of businesses, he said.

Torrance firefighters wear badges and carry identification. Anyone suspicious of their validity should contact the Torrance Fire Department, Deuel said.

Anyone who believes they were victims of phony inspections is asked to contact the Fire Marshal's Office.

Investigators recovered "an extensive list of businesses throughout the L.A. area" that might indicate a number of fraud victims, Deuel said.

"We are uncertain as to whether (the suspects) were just starting or these were businesses that have just been hit," Deuel said.